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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes a study that examined Georgia charter-school teachers' and principals' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in eight key areas of shared decision making: budgeting, curriculum/instruction, facilitating procedures, goals/visions/mission, operations, staffing, staff development, standards, and their overall impressions of shared decision making. The study focused on Georgia charter schools where teachers' and principals' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in shared decision making are congruent and incongruent. The study's purpose was to enable practitioners to assess extant shared decision making, plan for implementation of increased shared decision making, and add to the evolving body of knowledge on shared decision making and charter schools. The research sample included 21 charter schools with a combined student population of 22,000. The results show that teachers' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in, and overall impression of, shared decision making were incongruent, suggesting that teachers did not have a consistent knowledge base about shared decision making. Likewise, principals' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices were significantly different, indicating that the principals did not have the same mental model of how charter schools and mandated shared decision making should be implemented. (Contains 22 references.) (RJM)

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A STUDY OF TEACHERS' AND PRINCIPALS' PRECEPTIONS OF SHARED DECISION MAKING IN GEORGIA CHARTER SCHOOLS

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A STUDY OF TEACHERS' AND PRINCIPALS' PRECEPTIONS OF SHARED DECISION MAKING IN GEORGIA CHARTER SCHOOLS

ABSTRACT

This article reviews a study that examined Georgia charter school teachers' and principals' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in the eight key areas of shared decision making: budgeting, curriculum/instruction, facilitating procedures, goals/visions/mission, operations, staffing, staff development, standards, and their overall impressions of shared-decision making. The conclusions and findings pressented in this article substanciates the researchers contention that teachers' and principals' perceptions differ on the importance of and the extent that shared-decision making was being implemented in Georgia charter schools.

INTRODUCTION

For years, educational reformers have called for fundamental shifts in what takes place in the classrooms and schools. American public schools have responded by embracing a rhetoric of change, but their practices have conformed to the conservative agenda as far back as the creation of the public high school (Katz 1968). Despite the schools inability to implement change, the schoolhouse is still considered critical to attaining the public objectives of those advocating change and reform (Drake and Roe 1991).

In the quest to address the schools' inability to restructure, educators have been rethinking many aspects about how "this place called school" should be designed to facilitate learning (Godlad 1984, 274). Of particular interest to educators is the decentralizing of decision making through shared governance, the capstone for restructuring and renewing education (David 1996).

Charter schools, the reform initiative which mandates shared-decision making, are the most promising restructuring approach to schooling. The charter school concept embodies what reformers and educators view as "best practices" over the last decade (McGree,1995). All of the central values of innovation, autonomy, accountability, choice, teacher professionalism, efficiency, and system wide improvements are converged as the rationale for this single reform strategy, charter schools (McGree, 1995). Furthermore, the charter school concept is politically attractive and feasible in light of recent movements to redefine and create new governance structures for increased responsiveness and local control (McGree, 1995).

The components of a charter school that are related to shared-decision making significantly depart from the management and decision making structure of traditional public schools (McGree, 1995). Local school boards and state entities that once controlled every aspect of the school-house are now subject to parameters dictated by the provisions proposed in the shared governance section of the school's charter (Educational Information Center, 1995). Charter schools, through shared governance, can receive formula driven funding as if they were school districts. Through shared-decision making, parents, faculty, staff, and members of the community determine or describe the specific outcomes they want their students to

achieve. They can design, via shared governance, exactly how they choose to operate their schools, and most importantly, how decisions are made within their schools (Page,1996).

Shared decision making decentralizes control, transferring it from local school boards to the members of the school community. Therefore shared decision making places the responsibility and authority for making the majority of decisions at the school building level rather than at the central administration or school board level of the district (Jacobs, 1993). The basic premise of shared-decision making revolves around empowering those who are closest to the students to produce decisions better tailored to the particular needs of students (Briggs and Wahlsteller1994). Lifton (1992), asserts that teachers know and understand the needs of their students better than anyone. If the teachers had the authority to make decisions right at the building level, without being subject to any outside bureaucracy, much greater progress could be made. Lifton (1992), further asserts that the power to run the schools should also be shared with parents of the community to acknowledge their vital stake in their children's education.

Consequently, as more and more schools acquire charter status principals may not be prepared for the dramatic changes in their decision making role that charter status mandates. They may feel threatened by the concept of shared-decision making because they are only familiar with the bureaucratic top down approach to managing a school. They may also be ill- equipped to lead by influence rather than by control. What ever the reasons principals are still reluctant to share their decision making power. The principals' reluctance to share their decision-making power is creating a barrier that is causing differences to exist in teachers' and principals' concepts of their actual practices in shared-decision making. This is coupled with the fact that there is little or no data on teachers' and principals' perceptions of the ideal of shared decision making. There is also little or no data on the areas where teachers' and principals' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in shared decision making are congruent or noncongruent.

Therefore this study : (1) was the first and only of such studies responding to an identified need in the research literature; (2) examined Georgia charter school principals' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in shared decision making; (3) examined Georgia charter school teachers' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in shared decision making; (4) examined areas of shared decision making in Georgia charter schools where teachers' and principals' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in shared

decision making are congruent and noncongruent; (5) will enable practitioners to assess the dimensions of shared decision making already in place and plan for implementation of those that are not in place; and (6) added to the evolving body of knowledge on shared decision making and charter schools.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

POPULATION

For the purpose of this study, the population of charter schools in the state of Georgia (twenty-one) was the sample. Of the twenty-one charter schools in Georgia, eighteen are elementary schools, one is a middle school, and two are high schools. Approximately 22,000 students are being educated in the twenty-one charter schools in Georgia. Seventy-two percent of these students are European Americans, 25 percent are African Americans and 3 percent are others. About 10 percent of these students qualify for free or reduced lunches.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

A complete list of Georgia charter schools was acquired from the Georgia Department of Education's School Renewal and School Improvement Directory (197). Prior to conducting the study, each charter school principal received a personal telephone call followed by a letter requesting permission to conduct the study in his or her school. The questionnaires were administered by the principal's designee in each school.

INSTRUMENT

The instrument developed for this study was a modified version of Russell, Cooper, and Greenblatt's (1992) teacher Involvement and Participation Scale, Version 2 (TIPS 2). The questionnaire was designed to gather descriptive information on Georgia charter school teachers' and principals' perceptions about the ideal aspects and actual practices in the eight key areas of shared decision making: 1) budgeting, 2) curriculum/instruction, 3) facilitating procedures and structures, 4) goals/vision/mission, 5) operations, 6) staff development, 7) staffing and 8) standards.

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section of the survey contained thirty-five items. These items were designed to ascertain respondents' ideal and actual practices in each of the eight key areas of shared decision making. The second component of the teachers' questionnaire acquired their overall impressions of shared decision making in their setting and questions were asked that acquire

pertinent information concerning demographic data that was used for descriptive purposes only. The response format consisted of two 4-point Likert scales for each question.

MEASURES

The statistical tools used in this study were both descriptive and inferential. The descriptive statistics were used to describe the respondents and the schools in terms of the demographic variables. The dependent variables were described using means and standard deviations.

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using an inferential technique, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Wilks Lamba, the most commonly used test for multivariate testing, was used to determine the statistical significance of the differences between group centroids (Borg and Gall 1989). This test yields an F value which determines the level of statistical significance.

RESULTS

Fourteen of the 21 Georgia charter school principals and teachers participated in this study. All 14 principals from the schools that participated in the study returned their questionnaires. A total of 342 teacher questionnaires were returned from the 14 schools. Consequently, 67% of Georgia charter schools principals' and teachers' responses to the questionnaire were utilized to obtain data for this study.

The demographic findings from the data obtained portrayed the average Georgia charter school teacher as a 39 year old female with 13 years of experience. While the average Georgia charter school principal was portrayed as a 47 year old male with 24 years of experience. The base line data depicted the average Georgia charter school as an elementary school located in a suburban or rural setting, populated by a majority European- American students from a middle class socio-economic status.

There was a statistically significant difference in Georgia charter school teachers' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in shared-decision making. The differences lie in the teachers' perceptions of the importance of, and how much shared-decision making is actually practiced in budgeting, curriculum/instruction, facilitating, goals/vision/missions, operations, staffing, staff development, standards and overall impressions of shared-decision making. One aspect of the findings indicated that teachers played an active role in developing the vision for the school and in setting, implementing and developing the schools goals.

There was a statistically significant difference in Georgia charter school principals' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in shared-decision making. The differences were found in the principals' perceptions of the importance of and the extent shared decision making is actually practiced in curriculum/instruction, goals/vision/missions, operations, staffing, staff development, standards, and in their overall impressions of shared-decision making. There was not a statistically significant difference in the principals' perceptions of budgeting and facilitating areas of shared-decision making. This indicates that there was no difference in the principals' perceptions of how important and to what extent teachers should; participate in the planning of the budget and how the schools allotted funds are spent and how important and to what extent teachers working on councils together to arrive at decisions on the basis of majority rule or until consensus is reached. The findings support those of Sweeney (1994), who concluded that it was important for participants in a charter school to take the time to discuss and reach consensus with all school stakeholders. The findings are also partially supported by Miller (1994), who reported that teachers are mostly interested in shared-decision making concerning certain areas such as providing input in hiring teachers, designing and modifying curriculum and planning staff development.

There was a statistically significant difference in teachers' and principals' perceptions of the ideal of shared decision making. The difference was found in the teachers' and principals' perceptions of their overall impressions of shared-decision making. The findings revealed that teachers involvement in shared-decision making ranged from somewhat important to important for teacher professionalism, school improvement, better school morale and increased job satisfaction while principals perceptions ranged from important to very important. The findings that supported the principals' perceptions was conducted by Squires and Kranyik (1994), at the Yale's Child Study Center, where they concluded that participating in shared-decision making boosted employee moral and motivation. ." The findings that also supported the principals' perceptions was suggested by Karant (1989), who stated that "shared governance enhances professionalism by affording teachers greater participation which is satisfying to teachers because it expands their responsibilities in ways that give them significant influence in making their schools better." Spilman's (1996), findings also partially support the findings that shared-decision making resulted in increased professionalism, accountability, responsibility, and productivity across the entire schools' staff.

There was no statistically significant difference in teachers' and principals' perceptions of the actual practices in shared-decision making. The findings indicated that both teachers and principals felt they participated a great extent in decision making. These findings were not supported by Raywid (1990), who asserted that shared-decision making has failed to result in more inclusive decision making.

On a multivariate level there were no statistically significant differences, but it is important to include in the discussion overall impressions because the univariate value indicated significant difference. The findings concerning overall impressions indicated that teachers and principals differed in their perceptions of how shared-decision making affected teacher professionalism, school improvement, school morale and increased job satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The demographic base line data from the study indicated that Georgia charter schools are significantly different from the "norm." In fact Georgia charter schools fit the opponents descriptions as elitist private schools in disguise, that are found in wealthier neighborhoods, and are largely populated by European-American students.

The researcher found that Georgia charter school teachers' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in and overall impressions of shared-decision making were not congruent. The findings suggest to the researcher that teachers in Georgia charter schools do not have a consistent knowledge base about shared-decision making. The findings also seemed to suggest that Georgia charter school teachers' need to have a more uniform mental model about charter schools. The researcher believes that the findings seem to suggest that Georgia charter school teachers felt that the goals/vision/mission area of shared-decision making was very important and that it was practiced to a great extent. The data also seemed to suggest that there were large variances in Georgia charter school teachers' perceptions of the importance of the area of staffing in shared-decision making.

The researcher found that Georgia charter school principals' perceptions of the ideal and actual practices in and overall impressions of shared-decision making were significantly different. This suggest to the researcher that principals themselves do not have the same mental model of how charter schools and mandated shared-decision making should be implemented. This also suggest to the researcher that these differences could be contributed to the individuals themselves. The findings seemed to suggest that what

Georgia charter school principals didn't perceive as important was not practiced. The findings seemed to suggest that all the areas of shared-decision making that could be perceived as "power issues" such as budgeting, facilitating structures and procedures, operations and staffing had large discrepancies or variances. These findings also suggest to the researcher that the principals perceptions about the importance and extent to which shared decision making in staffing is practiced ranged from of some importance to very important and that it was practiced from not at all to a great extent.

The researcher found that Georgia charter school teachers' and principals' perceptions of the ideal of shared decision making were significantly different.

This suggest to the researcher that principals need to experience a change in their mind set concerning what they have traditionally felt contribute to increased teacher job satisfaction and professionalism. The findings also suggest to the researcher that principals and teachers do not share the same sentiments concerning what does and does not affect morale issues in the school house. The findings seemed to suggest that Georgia charter school principals' perceptions about the importance of the areas of shared decision making differed more than Georgia charter school teachers' perceptions. The findings also seem to conclude to the researcher that both teachers' and principals' perceptions differed greatly in the staffing area of shared-decision making.

The researcher found that Georgia charter school teachers' and principals' perceptions of their actual practices in and their overall impressions of shared-decision making were congruent. This suggest to the researcher that perhaps shared-decision making is working at an optimum level in this place we call school. On the other hand the findings also suggest to the researcher that Georgia teachers for so long have been denied a voice in what takes place in the school house, that they are grateful for the extent of participation in decision making that is granted.

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